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# THE JUBILEE OF THE PRINTING PRESS.

BY CHARLES WHIBLEY.

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JOHANNES GUTENBERG, the five hundredth anniversary of whose birth Germany has recently been celebrating, stands, and will stand through all time, for the living symbol of the printing press. Others have disputed his supremacy, and a vain patriotism would rob Mainz of its proper glory, giving the palm now to Holland, now to France. On the one hand we are told an amiable legend of one Coster, who, walking in a wood near to his native Haarlem, amused his leisure by cutting letters out of bark, and stamping them upon paper. This earth-shaking event, says the pedant, cannot be assigned to a later year than 1426, since then it was that the wood, the scene of Coster's contemplation, was abolished. We doubt neither Coster nor his bark; we know as little of his enterprise as did Gutenberg himself. We would only point out that anecdote or folklore is wont to precede history, and that this legend of Haarlem may be put in the same pigeon-hole with another legend, which derives the art of modelling in clay from an accidental shadow cast upon the wall. On the other hand, there seems no doubt that, as early as 1444, one Procope Waldfogel of Avignon instructed Davin de Caderousse, a Jew, in the art of writing artificially. But neither the Hebrew types of Caderousse nor the pensive walk of Coster disturb the sovereignty of Johannes Gutenberg, who remains the father of his art, as Homer is the father of the Epic, as Van Eyck is the father of oil-painting, as Columbus is the father of the New World.

Wherefore it was but just that Mainz should celebrate, with what splendor she might, her hero's jubilee. And, though Gutenberg himself, who spent his life in unrecognized poverty, would be at a loss to understand the enthusiasm of the people, it was inevitable that the feast of printing should be a popular feast. Vast

processions were unfolded beneath the shadow of the ancient church. If the costumes were archæological rather than elegant, if the emblems were sometimes a trifle obvious, the effect produced by the mingled colors, the crowded windows, the time-stained houses was of the proper century, and the soldiers of Frederic evoked a tumult of admiration. So there defiled all the arts and industries of Mainz and of Europe; Shakespeare jostled Cervantes, while Pallas Athene was not too far from Goethe; nor, in the jubilee of intellect, were the vineyards of the Rhine forgotten, and one car appositely emphasized the truth that, of the two, the wine-press is the older. And, all the while, the streets, decorated from end to end, were thronged by a motley mob of peasants and professors, of students and officers, of grand-dukes and shop-keepers. Nor was the purpose of the fête ever forgotten. The statue of Gutenberg was the end of all pilgrimages, and it was with a touching reverence that the triumphal wreaths were laid at the pedestal. All men knew whom they were honoring. How many considered the work which their hero accomplished?

Yet well does Gutenberg deserve the extravagant tribute thus paid him by a united people, since, for good or evil, his achievement has proved greater in its results than the achievement of any other man. Before all things, he came at the right moment. Invention, too, obeys the call of necessity; and it seems as though an inexorable law governs the processes of the human brain, as it governs the processes of nature. Less than twenty years after Gutenberg made his great discovery, the library of Constantinople was dispersed. What was lost it is idle to speculate, but "we may reflect," says Gibbon, "with pleasure that an inestimable portion of our classic treasures was safely deposited in Italy; and that the mechanics of a German town had invented an art which derides the havoc of time and barbarism." It is an ill description of Gutenberg, a mechanic of a German town; but it is admirably true that his invention was made at the very moment when it might best deride the havoc of time and barbarism. When the spoils of Constantinople travelled west, his printing press was ready to eternize them. So little, indeed, was he a mechanic that he spent an apostle's life in the service of his art. Nor did he pursue his ambition with any thought of renown; the forerunner of all advertisers, he shrunk by choice or habit from the risk of advertisement. He, the great disseminator of knowledge, has sedu-

lously suppressed all knowledge of himself. We know as little of him as of Homer, less than of Shakespeare.. His death and his birth are alike secret, and, though there is an ugly rumor of a broken promise, we know not whether he was ever married. However, some facts may be pieced together, and the materials of a portrait are not wholly lacking.

Johannes Gutenberg, then, was born at Mainz about the year 1400. By an admirable dogmatism, June the twenty-fourth is assumed as his birth, and, assuredly, that day is as good as another to celebrate. His family—Gensfleisch was its name—was noble, and, doubtless, he received such an education as befitted his quality. Moreover, since his ancestors had possessed the right of coining money, he was familiar from his youth with the mystery of metal casting. But, in his turbulent century, patrician birth did not mean affluence, and the struggles between the nobles and the people, between the city and the Church, may have involved his family in ruin. At any rate Gutenberg, like Velasquez, assumed the name of his mother, and early left his native city. So, it is at Strasburg that we first hear of him, poor and ingenious, a man of many shifts, yet with one ambition already sketched, and even half-realized. A legal document discovers him, at law with one Jürgen Dritzehn. The case is complicated and unimportant, but it proves that Gutenberg had once hoped to make money by selling hand-mirrors at the fair of Aix-la-Chapelle, and that (which is far more important) he had in 1438 devised all the implements of what was called his “black art.” Movable types, forms, presses worked by a screw—in fact all the essentials of modern printing—had by this time assumed a finished and practicable shape. It is evident, indeed, that Gutenberg could, if he would, have printed his Bible as easily in 1438 as in 1455; but money and encouragement were lacking, and the most important invention of our modern world could not supply its author with ink and paper. Yet for some years he seems to have lingered at Strasburg; at any rate, it is 1448 before he returns to Mainz, still poor and unprotected. However, supported by a just spirit of fanaticism, he pursued his unrecognized craft; and at last, in 1449, he asked the help of Johann Frist, a wealthy banker, who, not content with an irregular interest of six per cent., demanded a share of the discovery, and who, with Peter Schöffer to aid, presently set himself up as Gutenberg’s rival. Nor need our admiration of Gutenberg blind

us to the real merits and splendid service of Frist and Schöffer. The exploiter commonly goes further on the road of success than the unfriended inventor; and while Frist and Schöffer played the ungrateful and graceless part of the cuckoo, they not only made money by their shrewd management—they carried their wares as far as Paris—but they produced many a masterpiece of the printer's art. However, it is not worth while to discuss the trade disputes of the fifteenth century. It is enough to record that Gutenberg persisted loyally in his task until the end of his life, that in 1465 a small office at the court of Adolf von Nassau provided him with bare necessities, and that he died, blind, in 1468.

A tragic career, truly, and embittered by all the ironies of fate. He, whose art made public the world's literature, published naught else than his own misery. The very books which we owe to his genius carry no record of his name. By every artifice of skill or chance he seems to have evaded, in his own days, the touch of fame; his very ashes are scattered to the winds of heaven; yet the years have repaired the neglect of his time, and he is revealed at last for the great artist that he was. Herein, too, we may find a sufficient compensation for his misfortune. Asking bread, he has received many a commemorative stone; but not even poverty itself could rob him of the pleasure and curiosity wherewith his own work must have inspired him. For not only did he invent his own art, he brought it by his own taste and ingenuity to perfection. He was at once finisher and forerunner; such masterpieces as his Latin Bible are no experiments; they are a culmination of a beautiful and efficient craft. His types, the first ever cut, have a dignity and splendor, which were an example to a whole school; his pages, the first ever printed, are as sharp and clear as though they had fallen from a modern press, tricked out with all the "improvements." But Gutenberg understood precisely the problem which confronted him, and he did not publish his results until they were complete. In brief, the courage of revision was his, and that is why we regard him not as a primitive, for whom excuses should be made, but as an accomplished craftsman, whose glory rests in the perfection of his design.

The mystery of his life is properly matched by the rarity of his works, and we owe Mainz a profound debt of gratitude for having gathered together such a set of masterpieces as possibly will never be seen again. Not that the exhibition gives or pretends to give

a general view of printing. There are too many *lacunae* for completeness; and, while many of the great presses of the past are forgotten, we must look elsewhere for the later triumphs of the art. But the achievement of Gutenberg and his school is admirably represented, and Mainz has illustrated for us, with excellent clearness, both the theory and practice of her famous citizen. The human mind, even when it invents a new process, cannot create out of nothing, and the source of Gutenberg's inspiration is evident. His alphabet grew out of the manuscripts, as positively as the early railway carriage was adapted from the stage-coach. Nor could the printer have found a better model. The square, stern letters of his choice were admirably fitted for their purpose, and the repetition of the movable shapes gives to the pages of his Bible a uniform aspect, which is lacking in the patient copies of the monks. And not merely did Gutenberg design a noble alphabet, he understood the other art of the printer; he could fill the space of his pages with dignity and elegance. He did not forget that the aim of printing, as of all the graphic arts, is to be decorative as well as intelligible, so that, while you may read his magnificent Bible with the greatest ease, if you have the chance, you cannot but be struck by the pictorial effect of the printed page.

But Gutenberg imposed his style as well as his craft upon his followers. The "*De Officiis*" of 1465—it is significant that, after the Bible, it was Cicero who engrossed the early printers—bears the name of Schöffer, but the mind which controlled it is the mind of Gutenberg. And what shall we say of the exquisite Virgil of 1469, except that Johannes Mentelin of Strasburg had diligently learned the lesson of the master? But if recognition had come slowly to Gutenberg, his craft travelled in a very brief space from one end of Europe to the other. A press was set up in every town of Germany; the energy of Ratdolt and Jenson carried the new invention to Venice, where they were succeeded in due course by the great Aldus himself. Now, Aldus, by designing the beautiful type known as *Italic*, and by discarding the ancient folio, not only set an example of elegance for all time, but placed his treasures within the reach of scholars. And he did more than this; he it was who, with Junta of Florence, first taught the classics to deride the havoc of time and barbarism. Gutenberg, in truth, showed the path, which the Italians eagerly followed, and their progress insured the eternal safety of literature. Meanwhile, if Paris

had been slow to set up a press of her own, Frist and Schöffner, with a commercial instinct whereof Gutenberg knew nothing, had sent their bagmen to the French capital; and if we may believe Lamartine, which is doubtful, Frist was accused there of selling printed books as though they were manuscripts. The fraud, however, if fraud it were, was condoned on the ground that the invention was new; and Frist was paid as much as fifteen golden crowns for a book by Thomas Aquinas. But presently Paris found her own craftsmen, and Philippe Pignonchet devised the books that to-day are eagerly sought and highly prized. Of Caxton's achievement in the designing of Gothic type little need be said. The priceless collection, hidden in Manchester, is a secret monument to his skill; and the most expensive press of modern times has paid him the tribute of imitation. That cities so wealthy as Paris and London should readily have encouraged the art of printing, is not remarkable. But it is strange indeed that, less than forty years after the date of Gutenberg's first book, the remote Cetinje should have its printing press; yet, among the curiosities to be seen at Mainz, is what the catalogue calls a "*slavisch-cyrrillische kirchen druck*," imprinted at the Montenegrin capital in 1493.

In the sixteenth century, the art was universal and universally appreciated; and, as it grew in prosperity, it forgot its origins and fashioned new laws for itself. Its development was always in the direction of simplicity; the influence of the manuscripts, so obvious in the work of Gutenberg, rapidly disappeared, and little by little an alphabet was shaped, with which, in one form or another, we are familiar to-day. Gothic and Italic alike gave way to what is now known as Roman, and printing gained in precision what it lost in character. Despite the use of movable type, there was a certain variety in the earlier styles; the letters were not all molded with a hard edge; and the reader felt that a man, not a process, came between him and his author. Moreover, though Latin and Greek had their uniform orthography, a license in the spelling of living tongues gave a personal touch to the books of the sixteenth century, for which we look in vain in the printed pages of to-day. But such works as the Bible of Stephanus, the classics of the Plantin Press, the masterpieces of Lyons, the little books of the Elzevirs, all possess conspicuous virtues of their own, however much they may differ one from the other. Who, on this hand, would disdain Plantin's exquisite "Apuleius," in which the Italic

type of Aldus is used with admirable effect? Who, on that, would not feel rich in the possession of the first editions of "Rabelais," with their suggestion of the chap-book and the pedlar's pack?

So the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries brought with them an accomplished precision, which did not compensate for the vanished curiosity; and the art of printing followed as closely as might be the art of literature. It became humble or palatial, according to the character of the works which it expressed, and the first edition of Pope's "Homer" (for instance) is a proper index of that poem's character. Yet, there was still scope for individual talent; and the editions of the classics, printed by Baskerville, whether small or great, are worthy their occasion. Nor need we despair of the art as it is practiced to-day, though masterpieces are difficult to discover in the rubble which now encumbers us. At the outset, the printing press was the servant of theology and literature. The Bible, as in duty bound, took the first place, while Virgil and Cicero were not long neglected; but, long ago, the art of Gutenberg was degraded to the level of a cheap manufacture, and the books of to-day are very much alike in form as in substance. Yet, the great tradition is unbroken, and the work of Messrs Constable, in Edinburgh, or of the De Vinne Press in America, need not blush ingloriously in the presence of the ancient masterpieces.

There is a fashion in printing as in the other arts, and the fashion of to-day still sets toward Pre-Raphaelitism, if we may accept the evidence of the bookseller's catalogue. It is significant, too, that the very imperfect exhibition at Mainz gave the place of honor, among the moderns, to the productions of the Kelmscott Press—significant, because, in dealing with our contemporaries, we commonly permit fashion, or *snobisme*, as they call it in France, to do duty for judgment. So it is that Mr. Morris's books are said to represent the culmination of an art. Of course, they represent nothing of the sort; but, none the less, they are eagerly bought, and as ardently admired. Their failure, moreover, is a genuine disappointment. Mr. William Morris united to a genuine enthusiasm for typography a profound knowledge of books. Being, besides, a practical craftsman, he should have produced a set of masterpieces, which might take their place on a shelf of ancient classics, and he did no more than establish the Kelmscott Press. His first mistake was deserting the straight



path of tradition, to revert to an arbitrary moment of the past. But Pre-Raphaelitism was in his blood, and the Gothic type of Caxton allured him as surely as the primitive Italians allured his colleagues. His second mistake was to forget that simplicity and strength are the cardinal virtues of the printed page. So he crammed his books with ornament, confused text with illustration, and achieved not a sharp contrast of black and white, but a dull, mixed level of greyness. His books are unreadable, because, if the eye be busy in the separation of words from decoration, the mind cannot tire itself with literature; and because, whatever else a book may be, it is not an expensive, beribboned ornament for the drawing room table. No, if you would find the last link in the chain which binds our own time to the time of Gutenberg, you must look to Edinburgh. The edition of "Don Quixote," for instance, which the Messrs. Constable printed some two years since is neither affected nor archaistic. It does not confound the mistakes of a primitive master with excellence, and the artist who designed it remembers that he is designing not a wall paper nor an architectural embellishment, but a book. So a book it is, simple and austere, with just that suggestion of eld which should make its appearance appropriate to its author. And, as we may read it with comfort, we may look back to it with pleasure, as a fit companion for the classics printed by the masters of the craft.

"Printing," said Lamartine in a rhetorical pamphlet, "is the telescope of the soul." The image is fantastic and sentimental, yet it is not unjust. Printing it is that reveals to us "the soul" of Homer and of Aristophanes; and, once you admit the metaphor which was fashionable fifty years since, you must admit also the truth of the aphorism. Printing, then, in its best aspect, is the telescope of the soul, and it is as such that we have considered it. But printing has another aspect, which suggests neither telescopes nor souls. It has long been the servant of what is grandiloquently called the Press; it is the handmaiden of such cheap contrivances as publicity and the dissemination of news. Gutenberg, of course, could not have foreseen the terrific consequences of his invention. Why should he fear a dangerous popularity, when he could not find the wherewithal to build his press? Like many another great man, he was too deeply interested in his work, to speculate on its effect; and he sat him down to the composition of his Bible without wasting a thought upon the "extra special,"

which was most surely to follow. By a strange irony he destined his invention for the enlightenment of future ages, and though, for a few, it remains the "telescope" of Lamartine, the most of men regard it as an instrument of cheap learning and unblushing curiosity.

But the most curious circumstance is this: The world is not yet used to the printing press. The artist who invented it was born half a thousand years ago, and printing remains to-day "the black art" that it was called in 1455. The people still believe that there is some deviltry in it. How often do we hear confiding country folk murmur, "Why, I saw it in the papers," as though the mere multiplication of a statement by a rapidly running machine was proof conclusive of its truth! And the influence of the "Press" is solidly based upon this ignorance. Printing, in fact, has created power without responsibility. A statesman must some day answer for his sins, but a newspaper need but trim its sails with a little cunning, and it may defy the assaults of time and chance. There is Gutenberg's invention to aid it, and there is human credulity upon which it may trust; and, suppose it does mislead the people, the people, also, have a short memory, and inaccuracy is soon forgotten.

When Gutenberg's invention was first made public, neither kings nor ministers divined its possibilities of harm. But its power was soon apparent, and licenses and privileges were granted or withheld. Then, as newspapers became more numerous and clamored more loudly, they were partially controlled by stamps and paper-taxes, and a Free Press was chosen by the Radicals as their most valiant battle cry. After the Radical method, statement took the place of reason; and, without any argument, unlicensed printing was hung as a "palladium" (to use the cant term) upon the statue of Liberty. In vain it was urged that man, being fallible, was not to be trusted with so powerful a weapon as an uncensored newspaper; in vain it was pointed out that the possession of sufficient money for a press and a wad of paper was not a guarantee of knowledge or good feeling. The Radicals would not have it; they had made their axiom, and for them all was over but shouting, and they shouted so loudly that England, France and America rejoice to-day in a free Press. Those who argue from their inclination are confident that the cause of freedom is safe in the power of our newspapers. We may be permitted to take a less

optimistic view, and to regret the day when stamps were a check upon enterprise, and when the tax upon paper enriched the treasury.

What advantages, then, has an untrammelled Press conferred upon the world? In the first place, it has done its best to destroy sincerity, and to make privacy impossible. Once it was necessary for a man to base an opinion upon inquiry or research; he may now turn to his leading article and find an opinion ready made. He believes what he reads, as though he had discovered it for himself, and thus finds all things possible to him, save sincerity. Moreover, if only Gutenberg could return to the world, with what astonishment would he behold his art, fit for delicacy and learning, used to record the tittle-tattle of a not too refined society? Would he not feel shame at his own invention, when he witnessed the ardent ingenuity wherewith men and women intrigue to obtain press notices for themselves and their friends, the active indiscretion wherewith the journals belittle the heroes of our time? And might he not justly refute Lamartine, declaring that the printing press is not the telescope, but the microscope, of the soul?

The moral effects of printing are bad enough, but they are limited to the individual, and may pass with time. Far more dangerous, if we may believe the ambitious voice of journalism, are its political effects. We are constantly told that a newspaper, provided only it be "yellow" enough, may ensure peace or drive a country to war. If this be true, then are the dangers of life too great to be encountered; for we cannot believe that journalists are better than other men; and we should run a risk, indeed, if we confided our fortunes to a dozen bishops, say, or to a dozen lawyers, chosen by their money bags, and owing a responsibility to no man.

But, argue the newspapers in defence, it is the Press of the world which disseminates truth. Does it? If only it had an equal power to disseminate truth and falsehood, we might be content. Yet truth remains at the bottom of the well, while falsehood floats insolently to the surface. The last year has proved beyond a possibility of doubt the omnipotence of typography in the distribution of lies. Look at the press of Brussels, for instance, and discard every expression of genuine opinion. You will find remaining a mass of falsehood, which the miscreant who gave it to the compositor must have recognized for what it was. But the people saw it in the papers, and upon it framed an infamous opin-

ion. The case is by no means bettered by the assertion, which may or may not be true, that the journals of Brussels are subsidized by Dr. Leyds. If they are thus subsidized, the danger is vastly increased, since it is evident that one intriguer may force a falsehood upon a whole people; may, in fact, sow the seeds of an international enmity, whose consequences none may foresee!

But in this intrigue Gutenberg played no part, and it would be monstrously unkind to saddle him with the responsibility, let us say, of M. Henri Rochefort. The evil wrought by his invention is for the moment more obvious than the good; yet it is not too sanguine to hope that the good will outlast the evil, that the nobly printed classics, the daintily fashioned poets of the Aldine press will still endure, when the cheap newspapers of to-day are a forgotten disgrace. At any rate, we may honour the first of all our printers, because he discerned only the dignified possibilities of his art, and reflect that all the elaborate machinery in the world cannot impair his achievement, nor dim his glory.

CHARLES WHIBLEY.